

Margin as Center

Over the years the old facade of Storefront, being somewhat dull and decrepit, has always been generous in accepting many interventions for artistic causes. First, was the stenciling of "STOREFRONT" by John Fekner, a super-graffiti truly vernacular to the anarchistic urbanity of artists as renegades. Then, James Keyden Cathcart, Frank Fantauzzi, and Terrence Van Elslander inserted five portable toilets into the facade. Open as a gallery, for public use, these commodes of our primal sustenance elicited the draining of our civility into the compost of submissive and meaningless consumption, a syndrome of post-industrial city. Fatigued of art, as only a representation, the toilets counseled art to embrace functionality and underlined it as a physical experience.

Later, came the installation of "Formworks and Blackouts" by Mark West. Through a series of holes, made on the facade, concrete was poured into sacs of fabric that were attached outside. When formed, these ameobic members, in curvaceous form, made everyone passing to touch. So caressing, the way people handled them, even this brutal matter reminded us of the impoverishment of tactile experience in the built environment. With our visual appetite still dictating textures, patterns and materials of city, the re-emergence of tactility seems impossible, unless all artists and architects become blind.

As this collaborative building project by Vito Acconic and Steven Holl removed the old facade, many voiced their discomfort at the arrival of newness that would change the anonymous physicality of Storefront. Its humble state of presence certainly reflected the kind of independence and distance that Storefront kept from the manicured stature of the dominant institutions.

But the new facade can also create an equally participatory history, like the old one. The resistance to the changing facade is identical to the change, people are fearing, of Storefront itself. People often say how much they like us the way we are and that usually meant stay small and grass root. This rhetoric of "we like you to stay small" is like the impossibility of children remaining small and adorable forever. Much the same, Storefront must grow, in strength and productivity, proportional to its age. The notion of staying the same is contrary to experimentation which must always look for new and other things. Therefore, at least for me, the new facade means new things for Storefront.

Over the years Storefront represented two things, theoretical works and marginal ideas. The organization had the means of discourse in the form drawings, models, photos and texts. Yet this will be its first discourse on a built form and, if the theoretical works were left in their standard time for acceptance, they lose the urgency of their ideas and are historic the moment they become real. Reality, therefore, hardly benefits from ideas in emergence and the time that separates the conception and manifestation of ideas is the cause.

Sure the exhibition of ideas, in the form of representation, will continue at Storefront but why not try to build some for exhibition? This project is an experiment in built form and not on paper. Experiments are not exclusively on paper but, they too, can happen in the act of building. The separation that exists between theory and building is a major infraction in the discourse of aesthetic and, frankly, what really differentiates theory and practice is only that they are built or yet to be built.

This championing of reality has a purpose. The character of the built environment is critical to the civility of our social behavior. With cities imploding, by violence and separatism, theories on paper seem meaningless and hopeless. Ideas and theories should embrace the reality, in which we reside, and it is no longer sufficient to just think, draw or write. If the 'built' is at fault and defenseless, then *ideas* should be built and tried. Theoretical works are a stack of reality that 'we,' at large, are yet to comprehend and accept. However small it may be, Storefront is building this project to reveal the reality of theory.

This project is putting a gallery out into the city. As a built exhibition, the culture of experiment, that is always confined within the gallery, is now out and there. This is a new program for Storefront and, every two years, we will invite and commission artist(s) or architect(s), sometimes together, for an experimental building project.

Storefront is a forum for marginal ideas, the kind that are without economic, political and aesthetic dominance. However, if the recent changes in the world mean something, it is about the change in the meaning of the 'margin.' While the dominance of centers waver, new ideas, individuals and institutions are emerging. Changes are in order and, without centers, the margins lose their value. Then, the confrontation of the main and the alternative becomes void, and the new position of 'margin' would be to redefine the center in order to occupy it.

The project is also about the contemporary state of public and private spaces and their contradictions that govern our social and urban spaces. For spaces known as public, such as parks, corporate plazas and new riversides, security and surveillance are the rules of their sustainment. In places like Tompkins Square Park and the Battery City promenade, public and private spaces are territorially waged and ambiguous. Racial identity and economic status are the ingredients of exclusion and inclusion. Even on spaces that are open and expansive, there exists an invisible boundary of private drapes to control the public.

On the other hand, private spaces are becoming public spectacles. Spaces of housing projects are the markets of underground commerce. Stray bullets, the marks of private space becoming public. Talk shows, like Winfrey and Donahue, channel the intimacy of private lives for public consumption. As the violence half-tones the gloss of our cities, windows, doors, and walls become smaller and thicker. The reduction of fenestration affirms Virilios's interpretation of

architecture as a form of defense, this time, urban not military. Building material is not for decoration but the materialization of our spatial violence.

The irony of the last decade is the simultaneous conversion of public spaces into private; and private spaces into public. The differences, critical for the definition of both private and public, are now invisible and amorphous. Spaces, physical or otherwise, are now private and public; simultaneously open and closed, at the same time.

This project modifies Storefront's own reality of what is inside and outside; private and public. Made of oversized pivoting doors, linked by smaller openings that vertically rotate into tables and chairs, the new facade donates the interior space out into the sidewalk, and yet, steals the outside to inside. The long and triangular space, that earmarks Storefront, is now subdivided into five parts, each rotational to the degrees commanded by the four large, horizontally pivoting, doors. When completely open, the space that previously imprisoned the arts for private and exclusive viewing, itself becomes an environment of public discourse. When completely closed, it's like the fortress that the city is. There are no drawings or models inside, just an open and empty space for all to enter. It makes no explicit, political or environmental statement, and definitely lacks any stylistic motives. It's quiet, neutral and indiscernible, therefore, more relevant.

The neutrality of its form is a reflection of a collaboration that deduced individuality. Being neither all Acconci or all Holl this project, in many ways, subdued their own authority. Although the result may disappoint those who expect a cumulative effect from a collaboration, I am intrigued by their cancellation which undermines the myth of master artist and architect. The collaboration hoped for the merging of disciplines but, instead, outlined their distinctions, hierarchy, territoriality and insecurity. Aesthetics became offensive and defensive. This fisting in aesthetics contrasts sharply with the myths of their independence and uniqueness. Multi-disciplinarity is hard for the disciplinary purists and the violence in collaboration may in the end be good for both art and architecture.

Kyong Park